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ABSTRACT

Results are reported from a follow-up study of students' perceptions of their earlier open-informal learning environment. Subjects were high school graduating seniors who as fifth graders had experienced this instructional setting. While in fifth grade, subjects were videotaped engaging in open-informal activities. Upon graduation from high school 7 years later, participants were videotaped again while engaged in a panel discussion of their fifth-grade experiences. Both tapes were then studied by a panel of experienced elementary school teachers, who selected the subjects' stated perceptions concerning attitudes toward open-informal learning experiences. Such comments, which were determined by the panel to be representative of perceptions on which subjects agreed, were grouped and reported under five major categories: student choice of activity, attitudes toward school, teacher/student relationships, student goals and needs, and teacher role. Results strongly indicate that the students responded positively to the open-informal learning environment. (MP)

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A FOLLOW-UP STUDY

OPEN EDUCATION AS EVALUATED BY STUDENTS SEVEN YEARS LATER

Part I 1973 - 1980

Part II 1975 - 1982

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INTRODUCTION

A review of research procedures in education evaluation indicates an emphasis on standardized tests of academic achievement, plus observational and experimental methodologies. Teacher interviews have also been an important part of assessment strategy as have interviews with children and parents. The research, however, on open education is far from conclusive because of lack of reliable and valid instruments and a lack of a universally accepted definition of open education (Ellsworth 1979, Newport 1980).

Interview studies are still quite rare in open education and there is a need for more of them, for they may well make up in richness and depth what they lack in statistical precision (Horowitz 1979). Especially rare are any follow-up studies of students' perceptions of their open education experiences.

Of studies reviewed concerning students' attitude toward school, evidence indicates that, compared with children in traditional classrooms, open classroom children feel at least equally positive, and often more positive, towards their school experience (Horowitz 1979).

In the areas of independence and creativity the research findings generally tend to support the hypotheses that open classrooms do promote greater independence and creativity.

In a review of research on the impact of educational environment on student behavior, attitudes, and achievement, Weinstein (1979) found more "humane" educational settings were associated with better attendance, greater participation, and more positive attidues toward the class, the instructor, and classmates.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions held by high school graduates toward the open-informal learning environment which they had experienced in the fifth grade seven years earlier.

SETTING

The subjects were high school graduating seniors who, seven years earlier as fifth grade students, had experienced the open-informal learning environment. The groups were limited to individuals who were graduating from the local high school. The 1973 fifth grade class had included twenty-six students, seven girls, and nineteen boys. The 1975 fifth grade class had included twenty-eight students, fifteen girls and thirteen boys. All students were from a middle class suburban community. The classrooms were self-contained with no more space or funds than any of the other more "formal" classrooms in the building.

The open-informal learning environment was one of pedagogical openness which included the following characteristics as described by Stephens (1974).

1. A minimum of lessons for the whole class; most instruction geared to small groups or individuals.
2. A variety of activities progressing simultaneously.
3. Flexible scheduling.
4. An environment rich in materials.
5. Freedom for children to move about, converse, work together, and seek help from one another.
6. Opportunities for children to make decisions about their work and to develop responsibility for setting and meeting their educational goals.
7. Provision for children to investigate matters of concern to them.
8. Flexible learning groups formed around interests.

9. Emphasis on experimentation and involvement with materials.

10. An atmosphere of trust, acceptance of children, and respect for their diversity.

11. A minimum of grading and marking.

12. Honest and open relationships between teacher and pupil and between pupil and pupil.

PROCEDURE

In 1973, and in 1975, the fifth grade open-informal classrooms were videotaped showing the class members involved in several activities. The videotape was viewed by a panel of experienced teachers to determine the agreement on the openness and informality of the classroom learning environment.

There are many definitions of open education. Usually, however, there is agreement on a number of features. Students are involved in setting objectives. Diverse activities and materials are available. Space is used flexibly. Students are involved in decision-making. Scheduling depends on students' needs. Groups are based on students' interests. Self-evaluation of students is used, and students participate in rule-making (Macdonald 1970).

The learning environment was judged by the panel as open-education as Barth (1972), Katz (1972), Stephens (1974), and others have defined the term.

Seven years later, when the fifth graders were graduating from high school, they were studied as follows:

1. Each high school graduate was interviewed relative to individual recollections (facts and feelings) of that year in the fifth grade open-informal classroom.

2. The graduates then viewed the videotaped scenes of themselves as fifth graders when they were involved in the informal classroom.

3. The graduates were then taped as they were engaged in a panel discussion of their fifth grade experiences. Emphasis in the discussion was focused on how they now viewed their open-informal learning environment experiences and the value, as they perceived it, of that experience.

Both tapes (the tape of the subjects as fifth graders and the tape of the subjects as high school graduates) were studied by a panel of experienced elementary school teachers to select the subjects' stated perceptions concerning the subjects'

attitudes toward their open-informal learning experiences.

FINDINGS

(Part I 1973 - 1980)

The subjects' comments, which were determined by the panel to be representative of the perceptions on which there was agreement, were categorized as follows:

Student Choice of Activity

1. "I liked school back then because you did what you wanted to."
2. "I thought it was set up pretty good - you worked at your own rate and you were able to do what you want to do."
3. "It was a good experience because you got to do more science - which I really enjoyed - more than English."
4. "I liked it because you got to work on things you liked to do - so you wanted to learn more. You got to work at your own pace. You didn't have to work on just what they told you."
5. "It was good back then when we worked with animals and things and not just books."
6. "Back then when you worked as a group and at your own pace, you were more interested in school. Now in high school, you can't work at your own pace, they have a time limit on everything."

Attitude Toward School

1. "I had a lot of fun experiences. That was a real fun class for me. It was a warm environment and you felt like learning. Now you're afraid of what other kids are going to think."
2. "In my opinion the informal classroom system was pretty good. It seemed to work for me. I'm not saying it will work for everyone."
3. "Back then it was 'lots of fun stuff'."
4. "School was more enjoyable back then because it was more group learning than individual learning. School is a lot more fun when you stress groups. Now we shuttle from one room and teacher to another teacher. In that fifth grade we worked in groups of two or three - usually your friends - and you did everything throughout the day with them. It was really a lot more enjoyable then - we were a tighter knit group then we are now. Here in high school we are just kinda lost in the mass."
5. "I felt a lot better in the informal classroom than I have felt in other classrooms."

Teacher Student Relationships

1. "Now, in classrooms with some teachers, you're afraid to answer a question because, if your answer is wrong - that's it!"

2. "Our teacher was a good teacher. She got through to her students - you could communicate openly with her."

3. "Our teacher was real nice and you wanted to learn."

4. "It is better if the teacher relates to the student on a one to one basis and at the grade level of the student rather than 'I'm the teacher and you're the student and I'll tell you what to do.' The relationship should be more on a friendship basis."

5. "It is important that teachers let their students know that they are human--that they do have families like the rest of us--that they are not mechanical machines that are put in the closets when the students leave the room. It is important because then you can relate to the teachers and you know where they are coming from."

6. "It is important for teachers to try to relate to their students - to get down to the student's level and to be a person - to be yourself and let it come through on the subject - makes it more interesting."

7. "Important to have informality where you can relate with the teacher. You don't have to have open concept in order to have informality. The teacher has to put some of himself in it."

Student Goals: Needs or Wants?

1. "On the videotape, our teacher made the comment that students would sign up for what they needed to know, or what they think they need to know. A fifth grader is not going to sign up for what he <u>needs</u> to know; he is going to sign up for what he <u>wants</u> to do - the enjoyable things for him."

2. "If I disliked fractions, I would avoid them at all costs and do the things I liked and I would be missing part of my education."

3. "I don't think I missed much, I've always enjoyed school. But I think that for someone who didn't enjoy school - it would be a perfect way to spend the day doing nothing but walking around doing many different things. This informal environment would be good for someone who is self-motivated and would enjoy learning."

4. "With the checklist, you had your goals, but most of your goals weren't met. You tried to meet them but you weren't pushed to meet them."

5. "I enjoyed my experiences back then, it was fun for me but I didn't do the things I should have done. I didn't sign up for things I needed - I signed up for classes I liked. I fell behind in a lot of things."

6. "In an informal classroom system it is really easy for someone to be busy at doing nothing. It is easy to look busy and not be busy."

7. "A kid in the fifth grade is not going to know what is best for him as far as his education is concerned. I liked math so I did math a lot - but I didn't like to read so I neglected the reading activities. I am not a very strong reader now and I think that not being pushed more has hurt me."

8. "The goals for the week and the checklist which we had in fifth grade were good. I think it is very important for kids to learn to make a checklist or goal list and strive to meet those goals."

Need for Teacher "Push"

1. "It is good to let kids pick what they want to do but they should also be pushed a little bit to get what they need - the main points, like English."

2. "A teacher should learn how to push the students and still make it enjoyable for them. A teacher shouldn't be afraid to push a student."

3. "The teacher has got to push a student through. Some kids don't want to work. The teacher has really got to work with those kids."

4. "If students have any trouble, the teacher should help them work on that - like math, for example. The teacher should help students work extra hard on the areas where they are having trouble."

5. "The teacher didn't push us enough in our weak areas. What we were weak in - in grade school and weren't pushed in, we fell behind in high school and probably are still weak in."

6. "Some students need more pushing than others. The informal classroom would work best for the more advanced students who just want to surge on ahead of the class by themselves. But some of the slower students really need the pushing and the more general studies - like math and English - the basics."

7. "I think the classroom would be better if, for a couple of days a week, they let the kids do what they want to do in certain areas, but on certain other days, have the teacher say what the kids should do and push them in the areas where they are weaker."

8. "If they are going to have an open classroom they should have 2 or 3 teachers to work with students in areas where they are weak."

9. "I personally believe a classroom should have more structure than the one we had."

10. "I think our teacher had the right idea when she tried to make an open classroom but you did get a little worse in the subjects you were already bad at - you needed to be pushed alittle more. But it worked good for me."

(Part II 1975 - 1982)

The subjects' comments, which were determined by the panel to be representative of the perceptions on which there was agreement, were categorized as follows:

Student Choice of Activity

1. "In the 5th grade, we worked as individuals, we worked at our own pace."
2. "You had to do so much but you could do it when you wanted to."

Attitude Toward School

1. "It was like a different world, like a fantasy world. It was like one big family. It didn't seem like school. It was like all just like free time - it was great."
2. "We were learning and, in the process, having fun."
3. "If we had just worked on books it would have been boring. In some classes, you come in, they lecture and assign something and the next day, it's the same thing over again - day after day."
4. "In the 5th grade, it was something different every day."
5. "Some people would say that our kind of class was not an acceptable way - but they haven't experienced it."
6. "Everyone here from our 5th grade who viewed this video tape, said it was great."
7. "They really can't argue with us; we went through it."
8. "Many people hate school. Maybe they would like it as much as we do, and give it a lot more effort and go farther, if they had had the kind of experience we had."
9. "We have a lot of good memories from then."
10. "We liked school in 5th grade."
11. "This is the way classrooms should be set up. A school shouldn't be confining; with books all day. It should be a more relaxed system."
12. "If you haven't lived through something like this, how can you really say anything against it."

Teacher Student Relationships

1. "Our teacher worried about us 'as a person,' not 'as a group.' When you teach to a 'group,' some students are left out."
2. "Our 5th grade teacher knew us. She knew who liked what. If you didn't want to do this, she would have something different for you to do."

Student Goals: Needs or Wants

1. "I don't think any of us really missed out on anything. We could be individuals and we were with the teacher."

2. "We looked forward to the free time when we could work on our projects. It made us get through our basics quicker."

3. "There was always a group of people with the same interest."

4. "The people who were smart back then are still smart now."

5. "We could think on our own. We didn't have to have some big person say, 'You gotta do this and you gotta do that'. We could think on our own and say, 'Hey we have to do this and that'."

6. "As we look at the video tape, it is almost as though that 5th grade experience 'forshadowed' what was to come in high school."

7. "Some of the things we did (in that fifth grade) we are just now doing as high school seniors."

8. "That kind of learning experience in the 5th grade gave us more confidence to learn new things."

Need for Teacher "Push"

(none)

Personal Growth

(new category)

1. "It was creative for us. We all came out of there - we're more creative now."

2. "If we learned how to be an individual then, we can handle ourselves now. We aren't afraid to attempt to try something. We've got the get up and go and say, hey, I'm going to try it."

3. "In the 5th grade we learned responsibility. You had to do it on your own some. The teacher was there to help when you needed it."

4. "It let us 5th graders use our imagination a lot. It helped our creativity."

5. "We learned self-responsiblity and we carried on. We got irside of ourselves to push. We want something and we go and get it. We're not going to give up and say, 'Forget it, if I can't get it now . . .'"

6. "Maybe we can't say exactly how that year has helped us, but it really hasn't hurt us. We are more creative than students from most of the other schools."

7. "That 5th grade year gave us a lot more experience of 'what was to come'."

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

(Part I 1973 - 1980)

1. Student Choice of Activity

   Students liked choosing what they wanted to do, working at their own pace, and using materials other than books.

2. Attitude Toward School

   Students perceived the environment as warm, small group oriented, promoting friendships, and providing fun experiences.

3. Teacher-Student Relationships

   Students felt the teacher related to them on a one-to-one basis, communicated with them openly, motivated them to learn, and provided an atmosphere free of fear.

4. Student Goals: Needs or Wants

   Students believed fifth graders would not choose goals based on need, but on want; the informal environment is better for self-motivated learners; and it is important for children to learn to make goals and strive to meet them.

5. Need for Teacher Push

   Students perceived the teacher needed to push students in the basics, there should be more teachers in an open classroom, and a classroom should have more structure.

(Part II 1975 - 1982)

1. Student Choice of Activity

   Students felt they worked as individuals, worked at their own pace, and could choose when to do the work.

2. Attitude Toward School

   Students liked learning and having fun, having variety of materials and activity, and experiencing a relaxed day.

3. Teacher-Student Relationships

   Students perceived the teacher as caring about individuals, knowing individual's preferences and styles.

4. Student Goals: Needs or Wants

   Students believed they learned the basics, they could think on their own, and that the experience gave them confience.

5. Need for Teacher Push

This was not noted or referred to in the 1975 - 1982 data.

6. Personal Growth

Students perceived themselves as becoming creative, trying new things without fear, learning responsibility, pushing themselves from within, and becoming more confident.

CONCLUSIONS

I. Areas of agreement of the 1973 - 1980 group and the 1975 - 1982 group:

A. Students worked at their own pace

B. Students could make choices

C. Students had fun learning

D. Students were actively involved with materials

E. Students felt the environment was warm and accepting

F. Students perceived the teacher as relating to them on an individual basis

II. Areas of differing perceptions:

1973 - 1980	1975 - 1982
A. Some students would not choose activities based on need.	A. Some students perceived they learned the basics.
B. Some students felt the informal environment would be best for self-motivated learners.	B. Some students noted they learned to think on their own.
C. Some students perceived it is important to learn to set goals and strive to meet them.	C. Some students perceived they learned to feel confident.
D. Some students felt a need for teacher push.	D. Some students felt they learned responsibility and inner push.
E. Some students saw a need for more structure.	E. Some students perceived themselves as being creative.

This study provides some of the first information from a follow-up study of students' perceptions of their earlier open-informal learning environments.

The results strongly indicate that students, seven years later and after graduating from high school, still respond positively to the open-informal learning environment as described in this study.

This study supports research during the last decade. That is, open education consistently reaches its goals in creativity, self-concept, school attitudes, curiosity and independence (Walberg, Schiller, and Haertel 1979).

Further, recent research by Schubert and Banter (1982) found there is increasing support of the self-contained open classroom because cooperation of a team of teachers is not required, there is less noise and distraction, the teacher gets to know students better and is thus able to better plan individual instruction, there is more flexible use of time, and the teacher can help pupils understand the interrelatedness of subject matter.

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